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ABSTRACT

In a study of people's responses to the allegedly sex-neutral terms "man," "mankind," "human being," "person," and "individual," 43 11-year-old boys and girls and 127 young men and women were asked to read sentences containing the terms and assign referents for each sentence. Referents were assigned by choosing from a group of pictorial symbols representing males, females, and half male/half female individuals. Analysis of the results indicated that, although no totally sex-bound choices of referents were found (such as male figures only for the term "man") certain terms tended not to function in a consistently sex-indefinite manner for a majority of subjects. "Human beings" appeared to function as the most sex-indefinite term, and "man" or "men" as the least. The context in which the terms appeared did not seem to generate particularly strong effects. (The paper includes a table showing results for age and sex groups and an analysis of responses for each of the terms investigated, broken down by age and sex.) (GW)

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An Investigation of Referents of Selected Sex-Indefinite Terms in English*

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The Problem

In the United States over the past five years, the volume of research and writing on sex differences in language has increased dramatically. Many persons here today have contributed to this literature, which seems to have been at least in part prompted by the belief that changes in usage are and should be taking place. Following delineations earlier suggested by Furfey (1944), work has been focused on language changes due to the sex of (a) the speaker, (b) the hearer, and (c) the person or thing spoken or written about. The last of these analytic distinctions thus centers on the use of language to identify persons or whatever in terms of their sex, exemplifying what has come to be known as "referential language."

In the research we are reporting upon, we investigated the claim that there exist in the English language a number of terms which refer to people apart from the sex ascribed to them. These allegedly sex-neutral words or phrases, also sometimes called "generics," are exemplified by terms such as man, mankind, human being, person, individual, and the pronouns he, him and his. Even those that are denotatively masculine are assumed to refer more generally to males and females. This view of things dates back at least to the British prescriptive grammarians of the Eighteenth Century, who argued that the masculine form is properly generic because it logically encompasses the female. We may infer that in this case, as in many others, logic is confused with sociocultural presuppositions.

Recently, however, this concept of the sex-neutral or inclusive term has come into question. Some researchers hold that there is no actual sex-neutral set of terms in English. Drawing evidence from current descriptive lexicons (e.g., the Oxford English Dictionary) and linguistic analyses of literature and the media, they argue that such terms as he and man do not refer to women as well as men. They argue that if a sex-indefinite term is actually to include women, special semantic markers must be added - lady doctor, waitress, woman lawyer - which they also argue, diminishes the importance of the referents.

This lack of equivalence in "sharing" a referent is well documented in the current literature. To cite one example only, Graham (1975), a lexicographer, conducted a computer analysis of usage of the 1973 edition of the American Heritage Dictionary. She found that out of 940 citations for he, 79 percent referred to male human beings, 13% to male animals, and 4% to persons such as farmers assumed to be male. She determined that only

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4% of these citations, from the most frequently used publications in schools across the country, could be called sex-neutral, e.g., unspecified singular subject. And other examples of such findings abound in the literature.

We were thus confronted with complementary assumptions, both of which others have identified as discriminatory: one is that sex-neutral terms ("generics") do exist in English and refer to both males and females; and the other, that sex-neutral terms or sex-inclusive terms do not exist in English. In the latter case, females are usually not included as part of the referent or are so distinctly excluded that another terms must be coined for them. These represent extreme viewpoints for each position.

To check on these assumptions, we asked the following research questions. 1. Do the referents of the terms man, men, mankind, individual(s), human being(s), person, people and the pronominals he, him and his, include with male(s) and female(s)? 2. If not, to what referents do people assign these terms?

We also recognized that several factors could very well influence the consultants' responses. Non-linguistic factors obviously include sex and age. Males and females may select different referents. And adults may select different referents from children. So we asked 3. Do the sex and age of the consultants influence their choice of a referent for a term?

A possible major linguistic variable is that of context, defined in this study as a sentence in which one or more of the specified terms under study appear. From studies in pragmatics, we know that context influences the interpretation of lexical items. Hence, the final question we asked was 4. Does the context in which a term appears influence the referent selected for it?

Method

Consultants were selected on the basis of sex and age. One age group consisted of 11 year olds and a second, of adults whose ages ranged from late 17 to 25 years. The sex distribution within each group was, for the 11 year olds, 20 males and 23 females, and for the adults, 64 males and 63 females. Cultural identity and race were controlled for in that all the respondents were white members of mainstream culture in the U.S.A. That restriction was deemed necessary for several reasons: 1) the feminist movement in the U.S.A. is predominately a middle class phenomenon and 2) what Ulf Hannerz, (1969), a Swede, identified as "mainstream culture" is the dominant one in the United States. Women and men in subordinated cultures in the U.S.A. tend not to participate in the same ways nor necessarily to share the same sets of values (including Feminist ones). The choice of referents by such persons is subject matter for other research.

There are obviously developmental influences upon the learning of sex roles in a society. That occurs as part of the socialization process. Part of sex roles is language behavior; individuals learn to talk male or

female (Edelsky, 1977), with some differences showing quite early (Sachs, lieberman and Erickson 1973). We could also expect to find differences in the comprehension as well as the production of sex-related language. Hence, we selected the different age groups. We should have liked to include even younger consultants, but because the instrument we used involved reading, we selected only children who were enrolled in the fifth grade level or higher in U.S. schools. Most children of mainstream culture read independently and fairly fluently. Below that level, we couldn't be sure that inability to read might influence their responses more than their comprehension of the task and response to it, subsequent to that comprehension. Edelsky (1977) noted this same problem in her study, so had the sentence read aloud to the 7, 9 and 12 year old consultants she included. We chose not to read aloud to our younger consultants because of the possible influence of a male or a female voice on their choices of referent.

The consultants responded to the instrument in normal class groupings in a school setting. They all responded to an instrument containing 40 sentences, 37 of which contained one of the terms man, men, mankind, individual(s), human being(s), person and people. Four of those sentences also contained a form of the masculine pronoun he; e.g., A working person pays his own way. The other three sentences were clearly marked for male and female roles, e.g., The best man shouldn't be late for the wedding., and The fashion model watches her diet carefully. They were included to provide several clear choices of male and female referents.

As a consultant read each sentence, he or she chose a single chart from among seven which they felt best illustrated "who the sentence is talking about." The charts were lined up in alphabetical order in the front of the room. Chart A features 3 male figures; Chart B a single female; Chart C a single male; Chart D 3 females; Chart E two males and two females grouped together; Chart F a single figure half female and half male spliced vertically; and Chart G three of these female/male figures. The figures were based on the international sign symbols for male and female, with no identifying personal characteristics or facial features. One could think of them as abstracted male and female. The spliced figures were an attempt to create visually the notion of a single "sex-indefinite." Plural inclusiveness is relatively simple to achieve visually by showing a group of males and females (Chart E). But we also included Chart G which was a group of these spliced figures to determine whether there were some equivalence of choice with Charts E and G, or whether the spliced Figure signaled something quite different.

Choice was limited to a single chart for each sentence and indicated by circling the appropriate letter from the list A-G under each sentence.

Consultants finished the task by indicating at the bottom of the instrument their sex and age.

Results

The data collected in the form of chart chosen to represent a referent for each sentence were subjected to a Component Analysis of

Variance (CANOVA) to determine the choice of referents by sex and age for all items. Tables 1 and 2 exhibit the results of the CANOVA.

Table 1

CANOVA - Effects of Age and Sex upon

Referent Choices Across Items

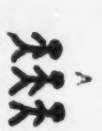
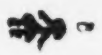
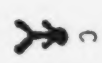
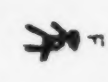
SOURCE	SS	DF	MS	F	P	
Within Cells	1120.615	166	6.751			
A (Sex)	24.133	1	24.133	3.575	.060	
B (Age)	39.116	1	39.116	5.794	.017*	
AB (Sex X Age)	0.541	1	0.541	0.080	.778	
Within Cells	577.472	166	3.479			
A	3.984	1	3.984	1.145	.286	
B	9.139	1	9.139	2.627	.107	
AB	3.381	1	3.381	0.972	.326	
Within Cells	2675.865	166	16.120			
A	186.746	1	186.746	11.585	.001*	
B	1.958	1	1.958	0.121	.728	
AB	18.276	1	18.276	1.134	.288	
Within Cells	518.822	166	3.125			
A	0.776	1	0.776	0.248	.619	
B	36.661	1	36.661	11.730	.001*	
AB	26.354	1	26.354	8.432	.004*	
Within Cells	4590.098	166	27.651			
A	0.001	1	0.001	0.000	.996	
B	142.348	1	142.348	5.148	.025*	
AB	0.272	1	0.272	0.010	.921	
Within Cells	4285.965	166	25.819			
A	71.766	1	71.766	2.780	.097	
B	2.818	1	2.818	0.109	.742	
AB	31.457	1	31.457	1.218	.271	
Within Cells	1563.664	166	9.420			
A	72.502	1	72.502	7.697	.006*	
B	0.901	1	0.901	0.096	.758	
AB	5.926	1	5.926	0.629	.429	

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for each Figure

Chosen by Age and Sex Groups

(date from Table 1)

			A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Younger Males	20 CNS	M	5.850	3.500	7.350	3.350	9.500	5.600	4.550
		SD	2.601	2.188	4.069	2.254	5.063	3.185	2.395
Older Males	64 CNS	M	4.609	2.625	8.391	1.328	11.703	6.938	4.266
		SD	2.640	1.759	4.648	1.448	5.117	4.532	3.077
Younger Females	23 CNS	M	4.870	3.304	6.391	1.826	9.696	8.391	5.217
		SD	2.833	2.285	3.299	1.969	4.050	6.625	2.430
Older Females	63 CNS	M	3.889	3.079	5.921	1.619	11.714	7.746	5.794
		SD	2.463	1.688	3.503	1.818	5.810	5.439	3.427

Table 1 shows the overall results and Table 2, the means and standard deviations for each of the four consultant groups. By inspecting the results in Table 2, we are able to ascertain contributions to the significant differences we find for five of the seven charts in Table 1. We find that young males and females selected Chart A more frequently than did adults ($p < .017$), and there is a tendency for males to select it more often than females. For Chart C, sex is the significant effect. Males, both adult and younger, choose this chart more frequently ($p < .001$) than did females. For Chart D, we find age and the interaction between age and sex to be significant (age - $p < .001$, sex x age - $p < .004$). Conspicuously, younger males chose this chart most frequently; that is the source of the age and sex interaction. This was the only chart for which the CANOVA revealed a significant interaction of this sort.

We find the older males and females chosing Chart E more frequently than the younger consultants of both sexes ($p < .025$). This was also the most frequently chosen chart by all respondents, apart from their age and sex.

There were no significant differences found for Chart F, although there was a trend toward sex differences ($p < .097$).

Females selected Chart G more frequently than males as a referent for the terms under study ($p < .006$).

Looking at the charts where significant differences were found, we find that Charts A (3 males), D (3 females), and E (mixed males and females) were selected on the basis of the age of the respondent, with the younger

ones opting for charts representing either males or females, but not both, and the adults opting for a chart (E) containing both male and female figures.

Significant sex differences in the choice of charts across all items showed up in the predominantly male choice (across age) of the chart showing a single male figure (C); and females of both age groups most often selected a chart showing a group of spliced male/female figures as a referent for the items they had selected.

The single significant interaction between age and sex was in the choice of Chart D, depicting a group of females, where we found younger males and females chosing the chart as a referent as well as females of all ages. Thus, the group to chose this chart the least frequently of all consultants were the adult males.

We also have information as to the charts most and least frequently chosen as referents by the total group of consultants. Chart E was the most frequently selected referent - a group of males and females. It accounts for almost 26.5% of all referent choices. The second most frequently chosen referent was the single spliced male/female figure, accounting for 18.1% of all choices. The third most frequently chosen was Chart C, the single male figure, garnering 17.54% of all referent choices. Fourth in "popularity" was Chart G, the group of spliced figures (12.54%), trailed by Chart A, the group of male figures (11.27%). Without a doubt, the two least frequently chosen charts were B and D, the single females and group of females respectively at 6% for B and 5.39% for D.

The CANOVA shows that certain referent choices correlated significantly with age and sex across all the terms studied. Percentage of referent choice gives us data on most "popular" to least "popular" choices irrespective of age and sex. But we also wanted to know in what ways the specific terms related to the referents chosen.

To examine possible context effect, we clustered the sentences containing the same term. Sentence set men, 5 sentences, showed some context differentiation with main referent choices being the chart picturing a group of males (A) at 36.5% and the chart picturing a group of males and females at 30.4%.

Person, the target referent in 4 sentences, demonstrated a pattern of referent choices which were much more evenly distributed across the charts than for men. However, for the sentence "The overweight person should consider dieting.", the major referent choice was the single female figure (37% for Chart B), with the spliced fe/male figure (Chart F) a low second at 18.8% of the responses. For the other 3 sentences containing person, Chart C, single male, was selected slightly more frequently than any other referent. People, the target term in 4 sentences, demonstrates a different response pattern from its singular form person and one showing little context effect. The overwhelming referent choice is the group of males and females (Chart E) which accounts for 32.75% of all choices. This and the two spliced figure charts account for 72.5% of all choices of referents.

Individual, the target term in 4 sentences, demonstrates a bimodal choice in that the charts chosen most consistently as referents are the single spliced figure (Charts F at 30.5%) and the single male figure (Charts C at 22%). The sentence, "The individual has certain rights in America.", deviated from this pattern in that the group of males and females (Chart E) was the highest choice at 35.2%. Individuals, the target word in 4 sentences, demonstrated few, if any, context effects in that the charts representing both males and females (E, F & G) were the most frequently chosen - 64.4%.

Human being, the target term in 4 sentences, is much like individuals, in that Charts E, F & G account for 70.5% of all referent choices, with the chart depicting a group of males and females the single most frequent choice at 38.7%, even though the term is singular. The plural human beings, the target term in 4 sentences, also demonstrates the same choice pattern of Charts E, F & G, with E and G accounting for 64.5% of all choices, and including F, 82% of all choices. The one possible context effect probably has something to do with reaction to the spliced figures. For the sentence "Human beings are imperfect.", the charts depicting a group of spliced figures (G), and the single spliced figure (F) received 78% of the responses.

Mankind, the target term of 3 sentences, shows little context effect as it generally follows the pattern of human beings, individuals and people, with 65.5% of choices for Charts E, F & G. However, the group of males chart (A) is the third highest referent choice (17.8%) which is not the case with human beings, individuals and people. A context effect ($p < .001$) is possibly due again to the spliced figures. For the sentence "Mankind faces an uncertain future.", Charts F and G showing these figures accounted for 53% of all choices.

Finally, we can also consider the effect of forms of the pronoun he in sentences. For the sentence "Man must trust himself.", 58% of referent choices were the male figures (Charts A and C), which was almost equal to the 59% choice of these charts for the sentence "Man has a basically violent nature." For the sentence "The working person pays his own way.", the single largest percentage of choices (31.69%) of any chart for all sentences containing person was the choice of a single male figure (Chart C) as referent for that sentence. We found almost the same pattern in the sentence "A wise individual knows his limits.", where the single male figure (Chart C) was the highest of any male referent choices (29%) for individual sentences and one of the highest choices of any referent in that set. The single counter case we find is the major referent for the sentence "The human being uses his intelligence to solve problems." The overwhelming choice was the group of male and female figures (E) at 35%.

Finally we analyzed the data according to response to referents by sex and age for each so-called sex-neutral term we studied. CANOVA was used to analyze responses to referents across all terms, but it's obviously important to look at the responses to terms individually to try to discern more specific patterns of response. Chi square tests were used to determine significance of differences in response by age and sex.

One comparison made was of responses to the referents (represented by the figures on the charts) by sex within and across the age groups, e.g., children and adults, man and men. For the sentence "The world needs honest men.", we found a general sex effect in that males of both ages chose the single male referent (Chart C) more frequently than females who chose Chart E (mixed males and females) most frequently ($p < .01$). For man in "No man can predict the future with certainty.", we found sex effects within one age grouping in that younger males selected mixed males and females (Chart E) more frequently than younger females who tended to choose either a group of males (A) or a spliced figure (F) ($p < .04$).

For "Mankind entered the space age in the 1950's.", the adult males and females showed significant differences in referent choices, males chosing a single male (C) and mixed males and females (E), and females chosing either the group of males (A) or the spliced fe/male figure (F) ($p < .0045$). There was also an overall sex effect, across age, in the direction of choice of a single male (C) by males and a group of males (A) by females.

Looking at the term individual, we found a clear picture when it was combined with his as in "A wise individual knows his limits." Adult males chose a single male figure (C) more frequently ($p < .03$) than anyone else. For "Individuals need to be challenged.", and "The individual has certain rights in America.", we found the following significant set differences across ages. For the first sentence, males tended to choose the chart depicting the single male figures (C) while females chose most frequently either mixed males and females (E) or the group of spliced figures (F) ($p < .009$). For the second sentence, males tended to choose the chart depicting a single male (C), while females tended to choose the single female (B) as referent ($p < .008$).

The direction of the sex differences in referent choices for the term person was as follows. In "The working person pays his own way.", we have the his present as another term under study. The results indicate that males tended to choose as referents the single male figure (C) and the group of males (A), while females tended toward the spliced figure (F) ($p < .02$). For the sentence, "A wise person spends money carefully.", young and adult males chose the single male figure (C) most frequently as the referent for person, while females of both ages tended to choose the single female (B). These differences were significant at the .002 level.

For the term human being, we found a similar pattern of responses but with one difference. For the sentence "The human being is said to be made in God's image.", males tended to choose a single male figure (C), while females tended to choose the spliced figure (F). This difference was significant at .01. However, for "One day human beings will live in space.", both males and females chose male referents, although males tended to choose the single male (C) and females the group of males (A) ($p < .02$). For "Every human being has a right to life.", the significant differences were between sexes in the adult age group. Males tended to choose a single male referent (C), while females tended to choose the spliced figures (F and G) ($p < .04$).

Generally, we could conclude that where significant sex differences appear in referent choices, males tended to choose male figures as referents, and females tended to chose either males and females mixed or spliced or female figures as referents.

Taking age differences in response patterns as the major factor rather than sex differences, we found that for one sentence only, "No man can predict the future with certainty.", did the children show greater consensus of referent choices than the adults. Thus, one major result of the Chi Square analysis was the finding that adult males and females achieved a significant consensus as to referent choice for a term in 16 sentences out of the 37 supposedly sex-neutral ones in the instrument. The direction of their choice may have been toward mixed male and female referents for a term as the CANOVA showed, but there is consensus. However, there were sentences to which the responses were not significant either according to sex or age or both, demonstrating no significant consensus or split in choice of referent.

Surveying the terms included in the study, the pronoun he was the only one which showed significance in referent choices across all sentences in which it appeared. All the other so-called sex-neutral terms, man, men, mankind, human being(s), individual(s), person, and people, were found at least once in sentences demonstrating no significance differences in referent choices.

Discussion and Conclusions

Considering the research questions 1) Do the referents of the so-called sex-indefinite terms under study include both males and females? and 2) If not, to what referents did the consultants assign the terms? The results indicate that although the referents chosen for the specific terms may include both males and females, our data fail to support the notion of a consistently sex-indefinite term in English due to the direction of the choices of referents. While we found no totally sex-bound choices of referents such as male figures only for the term man, we found significant patterns in the frequency of choices of referents which indicate that for a portion or majority of our consultants, certain terms or instances of those terms tended not to function in a consistently sex-indefinite manner. For example, the major choice of referent for the sentence "An overweight person should consider dieting." was the single female figure (Chart B), which, along with the group of females (Chart D), was the least chosen referent across all terms. For "Man must trust in himself.", we found the major referent selection was the single male figure (C).

We were able to scale our results in terms of referent choice along a continuum from most sex-indefinite to least sex-indefinite based on the consensus achieved among the four consultant groups (adult males and females, boys and girls). Human being(s) appeared to function as the most sex-indefinite term, referent choices being Charts E, F and G, those depicting males and females together in some combination. People also seemed to function in much the same manner as human being. Individual(s) and person

functioned in a less sex-indefinite manner in that male referents were consistently chosen as well as the mixed male/female charts; mankind presented an even more varied referent choice. Man and men are definitely the least sex-inclusive terms studied, with most referent choices being the male figures (Charts A and C). Evidently man and men tended to be perceived as terms referring to males, both by males and females.

Thus, in our data, referent choice presents a mixed picture but with trends toward a consensus about the sex-inclusiveness or lack thereof of a term.

3) Do the sex and age of a consultant influence the choice of referent for a term? The interaction of sex and age with referent choice were marked in our data. For example, males of both ages, adults and children, tended to choose a single male figure ($p < .001$) more frequently as a referent for all the terms studied, while females tended to choose the group of spliced figures (Chart G) more frequently as a referent for all terms ($p < .006$). Thus, males tended to choose male referents, while females tended to choose those we considered sex-indefinite or inclusive.

Adult males and females tended to choose the mixed group of males and females (E) more frequently as a referent for all terms than the children did ($p < .025$). The children, both boys and girls, tended to choose more frequently either the charts depicting males or females (A and D), but not both, as referents for all terms. Thus the adults seemed to select more sex-indefinite referents for the terms studied than the children did. Rather, their selections focused on sex-definite referents, either male or female.

Finally, adults achieved more consensus in their selection of all referents than the children did.

4) Does the context in which the term appears influence the choice of a referent? The contexts for the terms in our instrument do not seem to generate particularly strong effects. This could, of course, be the result of the particular sentences used in the instrument, thus specific to it. Possibly the most interesting effect was found in the sentences "Human beings are imperfect." and "Mankind faces an uncertain future." for which the referents were predominately the spliced figures. "Imperfect" and "uncertain future" could have triggered that choice.

From our data we conclude that terms such as human being and people tended to function as being more sex-inclusive than man and men did, based on referent choices. Man and men are definitely suspect in our study as candidates for the so-called generic, as is the pronoun he. These terms were interpreted in a far less sex-indefinite manner, despite context and age and sex of the consultant, than the others we studied. This finding is consistent with that of Schneider and Hacker (1973) who reported that college students taking a sociology course tended not to interpret the term man as sex-indefinite but as definitely male. Silveira (1978) noted that

response time on the part of women consultants was faster to pictures of men following sentences such as "Man is mortal." than to pictures of women when they were asked to decide if a picture belonged to a category named by the first word in the sentence. Martyna also calls into question the consistent function of he as a sex-indefinite pronoun. She states "The use of 'they' and 'he or she' as alternative generic terms suggests that 'he' doesn't adequately cover the generic territory" (1978. 135).

Taking the terms we studied as a set, we cannot conclude that they function consistently as sex-indefinites. Nor can we conclude that a single term such as person will function consistently as a sex-indefinite. Our findings indicate that for our study, the age and/or sex of the consultant most heavily influenced the referent choice for a term, despite the sentence context in which the term appeared. Males tended to choose male referents, while females opted for sex-indefinite or inclusive figures. And adults are evidently more socialized in some way in that their choices of referents were more consistent than the children's.

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